

**NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON  
COMMUNITY-BASED ACCESS TO  
JUSTICE: TECHNOLOGY,  
PARTNERSHIPS AND VOLUNTEERS  
CHIEF JUSTICE RONALD M. GEORGE  
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA  
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Good morning and welcome to the National Conference on Community-Based Access to Justice: Technology, Partnerships and Volunteers. I understand that in addition to the many Californians in attendance, we also have participants from across the nation — and even some from foreign countries. You come from a

wide variety of backgrounds — the courts, legal services, self-help centers, libraries, community agencies, and others committed to improving access to justice in their community. There could be no better illustration of the breadth of issues and demands confronting the judicial branch today than the different backgrounds, experience, and skills assembled here. Nor could there be a better demonstration of how fortunate we are to have so many dedicated, creative, and talented individuals committed to improving the administration of justice.

During my 7 years as Chief Justice of California, I have participated in the fundamental shift taking place throughout the

judicial systems in our nation — the growing recognition that we must take responsibility for ensuring that courts are truly accessible to those who need them. In assuming this responsibility, courts have cast a critical eye on every aspect of their operations — paying close attention to the reasonable needs and expectations of the public. It has been demonstrated repeatedly that we achieve our greatest successes when the judicial system engages in collaborative experimentation with other interested and affected segments of the community.

The word “court” traditionally conjures up a vision of two lawyers standing before a judge seated on an elevated bench, arguing a matter

which the judge will resolve by rendering a decision, to be carried out by the parties. The gulf between that vision and the reality of courts today has perhaps never been greater.

In many actions, particularly in family law, neither party to a dispute has or can obtain a lawyer. Many of our courts report that 80% of those persons seeking a divorce are unrepresented by counsel, that the same is true of 90% of those persons seeking domestic violence restraining orders and 90% of tenants in landlord/tenant cases. A growing number of those litigants do not speak English but instead one of the approximately 100 languages translated in California's courts. These changes

in the population of those who come before the courts require that the conventional role of the courts be reconsidered and expanded in previously unforeseen ways — requiring all of us to adapt creatively.

Ensuring effective community-based access, the broad theme of this conference, is key to the ability of the courts to meet the changing expectations and needs of the public. Meeting current needs and planning effectively for the future play a significant role in keeping our judicial system strong and able to serve the needs of the public. A vital and independent system of justice is integral to our democratic form of government. Courts have no army at

their disposal to support their role, and no public relations campaigns to air on prime-time television. Instead we rely upon the trust and confidence of the public we serve in order to function effectively. In the final analysis, it is our ability to provide justice for all that creates our strength.

In California, as in many other jurisdictions, we have made numerous changes to increase meaningful access to — and community involvement in — the courts. The list is too long to recite here, but let me highlight just a few initiatives to give you a sense of how broadly we have interpreted our mission.

For the first time, the Legislature a few years ago began to provide an appropriation for an Equal Access Fund to aid unrepresented litigants, which has enabled the Judicial Council — in collaboration with the California State Bar — to establish self-help centers in courts that have been set up jointly by the local court and legal services providers.

Courthouse family law facilitators are at work in every county, helping people navigate their way through family law proceedings. And local courts have developed self-help centers that focus on serving individuals who are not fluent in the English language or provide regional services in rural areas — including, in

some areas, vans that travel to remote parts of the county.

Community participation in court planning is now commonplace. Juvenile peer courts, community evenings where judges answer questions, educational programs in local schools that teach our children about our judicial system and why it is important to them — all of these are part of the process of increasing community access and finding new tools for courts to better interact with their communities.

These developments frequently have been made possible only through collaboration among the bar, the judiciary, court staff, community and social services organizations, legal services,



libraries, and, of course, the litigants themselves. Individuals such as yourselves are essential not only to the planning process, but also to the implementation of these programs that truly are making a difference.

This is not to say that a smooth road lies ahead for change and innovation. Like many other states, California faces tremendous budget challenges. Our courts are facing struggles to maintain their core services to the public — and many of the innovative programs that we have been able to develop may be at severe risk.

This conference is designed to explore how employing partnerships, technology, and volunteers can benefit the community. I must

confess that I am probably the last person who should be speaking to you about technological advances. I often refer to myself as roadkill on the information highway. But my personal lack of proficiency in things technological has not diminished my appreciation for the many accomplishments achieved by our courts with the use of tools that were unimaginable only a few years ago. And I am keenly appreciative of one of the components that this conference is focused upon — the people and the partnerships who ultimately are responsible for these accomplishments.

Our court system has expanded its technological resources significantly in the last

three years. Perhaps the most impressive example is our self-help website, which provides a broad array of services on-line. Its more than 900 pages of information already have been translated into Spanish, and large portions are being made available in other commonly spoken languages as well.

More than 1.6 million visitors used the site last year. It contains all 580 Judicial Council forms, which now can be completed on-line. It offers background information on the court system and on individual courts, as well as practical information on how to proceed — including directions to the courthouse. The web-site offers links and directions to where one

can obtain additional assistance — legal and otherwise — and has links to a host of other law-related web-sites. It already has won awards — but more importantly, it has demonstrated that on-line access to information about the courts is a remarkably useful resource for the public. In addition, by linking to the new LawHelpCalifornia website, users can find appropriate legal services in their own community.

Other ways in which we are employing technology to improve the administration of justice includes the development of a case management system for the trial courts. Our goals include developing more accurate

information about the workload of the courts and what is needed to process it, and enhancing out ability to exchange data with other government agencies, such as law enforcement and the Department of Motor Vehicles. Placing case information on-line also increases its accessibility. More and more information about cases and court calendars in California's judicial system can be located on-line by litigants and their lawyers. Some courts even offer automated notification of activity in a case if a user signs on for the service.

Video-conferencing is being used to enable individuals to meet without having to travel for court-related activity. This has been especially

helpful in broadcasting educational and other programs to courts up and down the state.

In the last two years, the Supreme Court held oral argument in locations — Fresno and San Jose — other than our traditional venues in San Francisco, Sacramento, and Los Angeles. These special oral argument sessions were broadcast live to classrooms in the surrounding area. The students prepared by reading the briefs and other materials created by the district Court of Appeal, the local bar, and the local school system. Following the telecasts, which included a question and answer session between students in the courtroom and the seven justices on the bench, classroom discussions were held

with the assistance of mentor lawyers and judges from the community. The sessions also were carried statewide on the public broadcast network and were a tremendous success in terms of stirring community interest and involvement — and educated the public by electronically expanding the walls of the classroom and the courtroom.

In another development, we are learning that computerized programs aimed at unrepresented litigants maximize valuable staff time by allowing individuals to obtain more information about the legal process and to complete documents on their own.

In Butte County, located in a rural area, the local Self Help Access Regional Program — called SHARP — uses videoconferencing for workshops. The assisting attorney is in one location, and paralegals possibly located in outlying offices — sometimes different counties — make sure that the litigants have the necessary forms and materials. The attorney leads the work shops, and can answer questions from any of the sites.

In Orange County, the Legal Aid Society in partnership with the Superior Court has developed I-CAN, the Interactive Community Assistance Network. This network of web-based legal services and interactive kiosks assist



self-represented litigants in creating properly formatted pleadings and completing legal forms. Internet phone technology enables users to obtain immediate technical assistance from Legal Aid staff, and help is available in English, Spanish and Vietnamese.

A program developed by the San Mateo court, called EZLegal File Service Bureau, is an interactive system that helps litigants complete forms on the internet by answering simple questions. It provides assistance with family law, small claims, guardianship, and landlord tenant matters. This program soon will be available to all counties in California.

In Sacramento County, small claims matters may be e-filed with the court. Nearly 40% of such litigants now complete forms on-line, freeing up substantial staff time to help others.

In short, we are learning to integrate the use of technology, volunteers, and staff in order to provide a broader range of service to the public. By combining refined technological tools with targeted support from staff and volunteers, we expect to be able to expand pro bono and other services to even more individuals who need them. Technology can stretch our available resources and personnel in exciting and effective ways — especially if it is backed up by knowledgeable staff and volunteers.

This is a time of great discovery. We are learning from the local courts, and at the same time starting to develop a statewide perspective. Our Administrative Office of the Courts is working to develop statewide resources to support the many programs that use volunteers at self-help centers in courts up and down California —and to provide information and communication that can facilitate the development of more programs.

Our dialogue here in California is part of an expanding national discussion about how we can work with others to improve access and ensure equality under the law. Many of you from different locations will have exciting

experiences and ideas to share. Conferences such as this one provide a unique opportunity to exchange information, to learn, and to be inspired and stimulated by the possibilities that lie ahead.

Welcome to this interesting and valuable program. I hope that the conference provides the impetus for more discoveries as we bring together representatives of the community, volunteers, court personnel, lawyers, and others in an effort to find out what we can do to improve the administration of justice for all those we serve.

I want to express my great appreciation to each of you for participating, and wish you an exciting and productive conference.

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